Independent complement constructions in Swedish and Danish: Insubordination or dependency shift?

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Received 17 June 2013; received in revised form 29 October 2013; accepted 1 November 2013

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to analyze the grammatical status of independent complement constructions in Swedish and Danish, i.e. constructions introduced by the complementizer *att* or *at* but without an accompanying main clause. These constructions can be used with two main functions: to express the speaker's evaluation of a presupposed state of affairs, or to elaborate on an aspect of the preceding discourse. In recent literature on these and similar constructions in other languages, both types have been analyzed as instances of the category of insubordination (Evans, 2007), i.e. constructions that combine subordinate marking with main clause use. We will argue that this analysis works well for the 'expressive' type, but that it cannot account for some of the typical properties of the 'elaborative' constructions, like the fact that they are pragmatically dependent and inconsistent in their use of subordinate marking. As an alternative, we will show that elaborative constructions can be dealt with much more naturally in terms of an existing model of dependency shift in clause combining, like the subordinate–coordinate shifts observed for many other types of subordinators.
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Keywords: Insubordination; Complementation; Swedish; Danish; Pragmatic (in)dependence; Dependency shift

1. Introduction

In this paper, we analyze the grammatical status of independent complement constructions in Swedish and Danish, i.e. constructions introduced by a complementizer (*att* or *at*, respectively) but without an accompanying main clause, as in (1) and (2) below. In recent literature, such independent subordinate constructions have been analyzed as instances of a broader pattern of 'insubordination' (e.g. Evans, 2007 for the first typological survey; Gras, 2011; ms. for Spanish; Verstraete et al., 2012 for Dutch), whereby formally subordinate constructions come to function as main clauses with their own independent semantics. Using data from Swedish and Danish, we argue that not all independent complement clauses can be analyzed as insubordinate, and that some types are much more easily accommodated within models of dependency shift as we know them from the literature on clause combining (e.g. Günthner, 1999; Goethals, 2002; Verstraete, 2005).

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(1) *At   noget   så katastrofalt kan   ende   så godt..*   (DANISH, IC[1])
     COMP something so catastrophic can.PRS end.INF so well
     '[I can't believe] that something so catastrophic can end so well.'

(2) *A:* *om vi skulle fråga våra eh förstaklassare här om dom vill ha betyg eller inte*
          skulle dom inte fatta vad det handlade om vet inte hur vad betyg eller vad det
          e (...) så det ju nånting som / andra lägger på
     B: *ja*
     A: **att   det det kommer ju   sen   atomatist   i**
          COMP it it come.PRS PART afterwards automatically in
          skolan   att   man får   betyg *å då kommer den här /*
          school.DEF COMP one get.PRS grades
          konkurrensen ännu mera in tror jag va   (SWEDISH, GSLC)
     'A: if we were to ask our first-graders here if they want to have a diploma or not
          they wouldn't understand what it was about, don't know how what grades or
          what it is (. . .) so it's something that / others impose
     B: yes
     A: **that it it then comes automatically in school that one gets grades** and then this
          competition starts even more I think right'

The structures in (1) and (2) illustrate the two most important types of independent complement constructions (henceforth ICCs) in Swedish and Danish. First, ICCs can be used to express the speaker's evaluation of a presupposed state of affairs, as in example (1), where the speaker expresses their surprise that a catastrophic event can end so well. Second, ICCs can also be used to elaborate on something that was said before, as in example (2), where the speaker elaborates on their claim that striving for grades in school is imposed by the system. These two categories, which we will call *expressive* and *elaborative*, can be distinguished on the basis of a number of functional and formal properties, which we discuss in more detail below.[2] Our investigation into the grammatical status of both types of ICCs will encompass the following questions. (i) Can expressive and elaborative ICCs be considered 'main clauses', in spite of their subordinate marking, or are they still 'dependent' in some sense? (ii) What is the status of the complementizer in such independent constructions? (iii) How did these constructions develop?

In this paper we argue that expressive ICCs are quite different from elaborative ICCs on all of these parameters, unlike what has been suggested in much of the recent literature on independent subordinate clauses (e.g. Evans, 2007; Gras, 2011, 2012, ms.; Verstraete et al., 2012), and more or less in line with the argument developed by Mithun (2008). One obvious candidate for the analysis of our two types of ICCs is the concept of insubordination, i.e. ''the conventionalized main clause use of what, on prima facie grounds, appear to be formally subordinate clauses'' (Evans, 2007: 367). Evans (2007) captures the essential paradox of subordinate marking for a main clause by identifying a broad cross-linguistic pattern whereby structures that are formally marked as subordinate come to function as main clauses, possibly through a process of ellipsis of the main clause and subsequent conventionalization of interpretations at the level of the construction. At first sight, both types of ICCs seem to fit this pattern quite well. However, we will show that only expressive ICCs are a typical instance of insubordination, with clear subordinate marking and a conventionalized independent meaning. For elaborative constructions we can identify a number of properties that cannot easily be dealt with within the framework of insubordination, like the fact that they are pragmatically dependent and inconsistent in their use of subordinate marking.

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[2] From a diachronic perspective, there were more types than just these two, for instance also an 'optative' type expressing the speaker's wishes (see, for instance, Lehti-Eklund, 2001: 86 for such constructions in Swedish, and Hansen and Heltoft, 2011: 769 for Danish), which is still found in other Germanic languages like German and Dutch (e.g. Panther and Thornburg, 2011 for German, Verstraete et al., 2012 for Dutch). In this paper, however, we will limit ourselves to the two types of ICCs that are attested in present-day Danish and Swedish, i.e. the expressive and the elaborative types.